



# Santa Cruz County Community Foundation

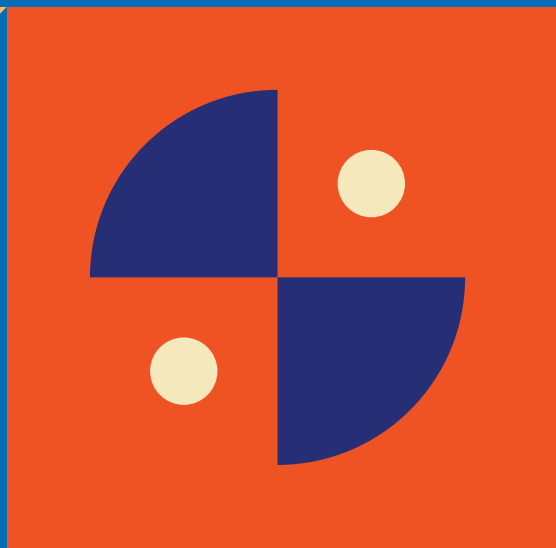
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**CFLeads** | Community Foundations  
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The Community Foundation Santa Cruz County has been on a committed equity journey since updating its mission, vision, and values statements in 2018. Among other actions, the Foundation has established an equity-focused granting initiative called “Rise Together,” which prides itself on community-led grantmaking. To align its racial equity goals, the Foundation has developed a tracker tool which measures progress against goals and helps hold the Foundation accountable to its commitments.



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# Introduction

The Community Foundation Santa Cruz County was founded in 1982 in response to a natural disaster: a storm that dropped 25 inches of rain and caused extensive flooding and mudslides. Citizens of the region were looking for ways to support recovery efforts over the long term, and the Foundation was established to meet this need. Since its inception, the Foundation has distributed \$223M in grants serving over 800 nonprofit organizations.

When Susan True joined the Foundation as Chief Executive Officer in 2017, however, she perceived that there was still a long way to go in terms of how the organization addressed racial equity.

*“While we had made some progress, there was a gap between how we perceived our equity journey and how leaders of color in the community felt,” True said.*

“We began looking at our grantmaking portfolio to see what kinds of organizations were missing and we noticed that there was a lot more we could do to help lift up the voices, culture, and power of people of color.”

Racial equity has become an explicit and central priority under True’s leadership, both in terms of the Foundation’s community-facing work and its internal operations. The Foundation has also established a racial equity tracker to measure its progress against goals and to hold itself accountable to commitments.

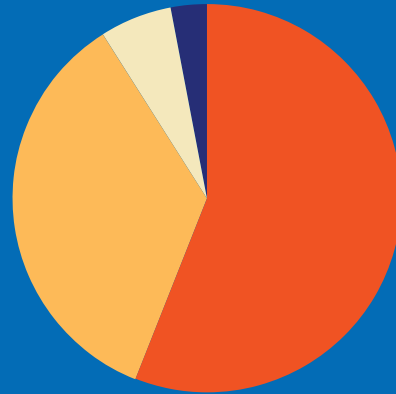


**Santa Cruz County is a coastal county south of San Francisco that is the unceded territory of the Awaswas and Mutsun speaking peoples.<sup>1</sup>**

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Today, the county is home to approximately 264,000 people:

- 56% White
- 35% Hispanic or Latino
- 5% Asian
- 2% Black



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**\$96,000**

is the median household income. Compared to national averages, Santa Cruz County is relatively affluent.<sup>2</sup>

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**However, there exist large disparities between racial and ethnic groups within the county.**



The northern part of the county is relatively more White and high-income.

While the southern part of the county has a higher Hispanic population and is relatively lower-income.

There are also disparities in rates of educational attainment countywide, with Hispanic or Latino residents significantly less likely to have a high school diploma.<sup>3</sup> For lower-income residents of Santa Cruz County, the cost of living and, in particular, housing are significant challenges.



**The county was recently found to be the most expensive area for renters in the US.<sup>4</sup>**

# A New Vision

Soon after Susan True became CEO in 2017, the Foundation embarked on a process to update its mission, vision, and values statements. According to True, this was a long process:

*“We took the time to come to a consensus and become values-aligned when it came to equity work.”*

The process resulted in a vision statement with equity at its center: “To make Santa Cruz County thrive for all who call it home, now and in the future.” Under this vision, one of the organization’s core values was “opportunity,” which was defined as follows: “We leverage our resources toward a future that is just, equitable, and inclusive of our diverse community.”<sup>5</sup>

These statements represented a big shift for the Foundation. Susan True reflected, “I think when we started saying that one of your values is to make Santa Cruz County more just and equitable, it required us to do things differently.” True also recognizes the unique challenges of doing this work in Santa Cruz County, which experiences extreme levels of income inequality:

*“The big picture is that [much of the county] participates in a low-wage service and agricultural economy, and faces an incredibly high cost of living.”*

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**Susan True**

*CEO of Community Foundation Santa Cruz County*

# Rise Together

The Foundation's flagship community-facing program in service of racial equity is called "Rise Together," founded in June 2020 in response to the murder of George Floyd and the disproportionate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on communities of color. Rise Together is a coalition of 32 Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) leaders and a team from the Foundation working together to advance racial equity in the region. There are five core goals for the coalition: to increase upward economic mobility for people of color; to amplify art and storytelling from BIPOC communities; to change policies and systems in the name of anti-racism; to deliver essential services to communities that need them most; and to ensure robust and sustainable funding for communities of color in Santa Cruz County.<sup>6</sup>

In 2022, Rise Together distributed over \$400,000 in grants to a variety of organizations advancing these goals. For example, the grantee Amah Mutsun Land Trust received funding for a new position producing and distributing healthy, organic, and native foods to the Amah Mutsun Tribal community. Another grantee, Housing Santa Cruz County, advocates for affordable housing with a focus on communities of color countywide. While the Black Surf Club Santa Cruz received Rise Together funding to expand programs that reduce barriers to outdoor spaces, water, and surfing for people of color.<sup>7</sup>

These grants were decided upon via a participatory grantmaking process. For the Community Foundation Santa Cruz County, it was essential to let community members of color take the lead in this process. Hilary Bryant, the Foundation's Donor Services Director, reflected:

*"We [the Foundation] were the convener ... but we are not directing the work. I think that with equity work, it was really important for us to do it with other organizations ... It's all of ours collectively, and we wanted to create that space where BIPOC leaders would have a seat at the table and set the direction for how the work would proceed, and we would play a supporting role."*

In addition to the Rise Together initiative, Community Foundation Santa Cruz County has created guidance for its donor-advised funds. In a document called "Tips on Giving Locally for Racial Equity," the Foundation encourages donors to prioritize racial equity in their work, and presents key questions to consider in assessing where to direct donations, including: whether BIPOC communities benefit from an organization's work; whether the organization has BIPOC leaders; and whether the organization has "authentic relationships" with communities of color.<sup>8</sup>



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# A Diversifying Foundation

The Community Foundation Santa Cruz County is a relatively small organization made up of 16 staff members, with relatively low turnover. As such, increasing the diversity of the Foundation's staff has been a slow process according to Susan True. But the Foundation has become more proactive about prioritizing equity in its job postings and hiring processes. Recalling the Foundation's job postings in the past, True reflected,

*"We were not being explicit enough about our prioritization of equity, but now we do communicate that explicitly and we link to our equity approach on the website."*

The Foundation's board has also become more proactive in seeking diverse representation, which has driven a shift in the composition of the board. The current board is 36 percent female, and 36 percent Black or Latinx. Donor Services Director Hilary Bryant reflected, "We are slowly transforming the Foundation, one hire at a time, one board member at a time ... When I used to look at the Foundation from the outside, it felt like a place for other people, people of wealth, older people ... My hope is that now as people watch our work and see who is working with us, they feel that this is a home for everyone."

As the Foundation becomes more diverse, it has also made efforts to shift its culture accordingly. Now, every staff member has a specific goal focused on equity learning that is integrated into their professional development plans and performance evaluations. As a whole, the staff has participated in training sessions at the University of California Santa Cruz's American Indian Resource Center, providing a grounding in the region's tribal history. The Foundation also participated in the [Racial Equity Institute's](#) Groundwater Training, which looks at root causes of structural racism in American society. Finally, Foundation leadership participated in the [CFLeads Equity Network](#), a series of convenings bringing together community foundations from around the country working to advance equity. The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated that these sessions be held virtually, but there was still value to the peer learning provided. "It was tremendously powerful, there was a lot of intimate and intense dialogue [between participants from different community foundations]," said Hilary Bryant, "I just wish we had been able to do it in person, because I can only imagine how it would have been amplified."





# Evaluation, Accountability, and Improvement

To guide execution of its equity vision, the Community Foundation Santa Cruz County has created a “racial equity tracker” to measure progress against goals, hold itself accountable, and identify areas for improvement. Susan True reflected, “We started being more serious about tracking racial equity goals in 2020; this started with gathering baseline data for that year, and then we gathered data for 2021 and 2022 to measure progress.”

The tracker includes both internal and external goals. For example, there is a goal that Foundation staff and board reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the county, and another goal that a certain percentage of grant dollars go to organizations led by and serving people of color. Other goals are more perception-based; for

example, one goal stipulates that partners and donors attending Foundation events report an increase in racial equity knowledge. All of these goals are listed on a centralized spreadsheet, with year-over-year progress captured for each.

For Susan True, tracking progress in this way is essential to ensuring accountability. “We have to do more, and we have to have accountability around our commitments and actions.” This emphasis on accountability is especially important to True because she is a White leader engaged in this work. “We’re a White-led organization that’s still primarily White-staffed and trying to advance equity work,” she said. “We want to know that we’re actually serving people of color in the county and that’s why I’m focused on the accountability piece.”



# Equity Work in a Time of Crisis Response

After the seismic disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, Santa Cruz County has been thrust into crisis once again as storms and floods have caused significant damage along the California coast. In 2023, California was hit by a series of atmospheric river storms, including heavy rainfall, dangerous wind gusts, and tornados. One March 2023 “bomb cyclone” storm brought extensive flooding and mudslides to Santa Cruz County, resulting in an evacuation order for many of the county’s residents.<sup>9</sup>

“We’ve had to do nonstop disaster response work throughout the first quarter of the year,” said Hilary Bryant, acknowledging that this responsibility has disrupted the progress of the Foundation’s equity work. “Everyone was all in on doing equity work, and then these outside things happened that are so all-consuming that there is no capacity to manage much more than what’s in front of you,” Bryant reflected.

That said, the Foundation has tried its best to foreground principles of equity in its disaster response as well. “Those with the lowest incomes in our community are being hit the hardest [by disaster],” Bryant said, “especially people who are uninsured or undocumented, and our focus is on those places where we can be most helpful.”

The urgency of this need has taken priority over longer-term equity work. According to Susan True, “We’ve been in crisis supporting basic human services, which makes it hard to do more long-term, powerbuilding work.”

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**Susan True**

*CEO of Santa Cruz County Community Foundation*



# Looking Forward

The leadership of Community Foundation Santa Cruz County is proud of the steps it has taken so far in its equity journey, but recognizes that there remains a long way to go. The Foundation is committed to continuing to diversify its staff and board, and ensuring that team members feel at home and empowered in their roles. According to Hillary Bryant, the key question is: "How can we make the community feel more

and more welcome at the Foundation?" Forward progress on this question will continue to make the Foundation a more credible advocate for equity in the community, where it hopes to use its influence to inspire change. "There are people in our community making decisions every day that can be more just and equitable," reflected Susan True. "How do we use our influence to make that happen?"

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**Susan True**

*CEO of Santa Cruz County Community Foundation*

## Endnotes

- 1 Rise Together, "[Rise Together Santa Cruz County](#)"
- 2 U.S. Census Bureau, "[Quick Facts: Santa Cruz County](#)"
- 3 Santa Cruz County Workforce Development Board, "[Santa Cruz County 2021 State of the Workforce](#)"
- 4 Amy Larson, "[This California county is most expensive in U.S. for renters, and it's not SF.](#)" KRON4, June 2023
- 5 Community Foundation Santa Cruz County, "[Your Community Foundation](#)"
- 6 Rise Together, "[Goals and Actions](#)"
- 7 Rise Together, "[Rise Together Grants](#)"
- 8 Community Foundation Santa Cruz County, "[Tips on Giving Locally for Racial Equity](#)"
- 9 Santa Cruz Sentinel, "[Santa Cruz County reels as atmospheric river storm causes flooding, other damage](#)"

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